

“We Are Evidently Aryans”

Why Italian fascists embraced Hitler’s anti-Semitism.

By *Ruth Ben-Ghiat*



Adolf Hitler riding in a car with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini while the crowd gives the fascist salute, Munich, Germany, September 1937.

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Anti-Semitism had little or no place in Italian fascist doctrine before 1938, reflecting the Italian Jewish community’s relatively pacific existence on the peninsula. The tiny size of the country’s Jewish population (about 44,000 out of 44 million), the frequency of intermarriage, the physiognomic and cultural similarities that linked Italians of Catholic and Jewish faiths,

and the absence of popular anti-Semitic violence had allowed the Jews to enjoy a relatively harmonious existence in Italy throughout the liberal period.¹

Though the conquest of Ethiopia would produce a slew of official efforts meant to inculcate a “racial consciousness,” before and after Hitler’s rise to power, Mussolini had publicly rejected credos of biological racism as utopian and ahistorical. In 1933, he authorized a public attack against Nazi racial doctrines.

But we should be cautious in interpreting this as a denunciation of anti-Jewish sentiments. More than any support for Jews, fascist anti-racism of the early ’30s reflected the Duce’s desire to portray Italian fascism as different from and superior to the ideas being propagated by the parvenu Hitler. During 20 years of rule, Mussolini’s attitudes toward the Jews were guided by a similar pragmatism. When he felt that the Jews would help him attain his domestic and foreign policy goals, he was for them; when the Axis alliance led him to perceive the Jews as an obstacle to reaching those goals, he did not hesitate to turn against them.²

Just two months after the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis, in fact, Mussolini published a series of anonymous pronouncements in his newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, that set the tone for the dictatorship’s new attitude toward Italian Jews. Dismissing centuries of historical and theological debate, the Duce explained that “anti-Semitism is inevitable wherever there is exaggerated Semitic visibility, interference, and arrogance. The excessive Jew gives rise to the anti-Jew [*Il troppo ebreo fa nascere l’antiebreo*].”³ Mussolini’s remarks anticipated the different attitudes and aims that separated the Italian and the German racial campaigns. The Italians sought less to eradicate Jews entirely from society than to coerce changes in those Jewish behaviors and customs that had long frustrated Italians and Catholics.⁴

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Although anti-Jewish policies were modeled on the Nazi Nuremberg laws, they also built on and responded to national issues and traditions. In service of the fascist intent to cure national traits that had supposedly contributed in the past to Italian “backwardness” and national fragmentation, the Jew emerged after 1938 as a primary symbol of the forces that had consigned Italy to a position on the margins of modernity. The fascist anti-Semitic campaign shared images and legal provisions with other countries, but it also offered an occasion for the articulation of specifically Italian grievances and goals.

The “Manifesto of Racial Scientists,” which appeared in the fascist press on Bastille Day 1938, signaled the start of the official anti-Semitic campaign. Written by the Duce in collaboration with a group of scholars, the manifesto established an irremediable divide between Jews and Italians. The former were now defined as an “unassimilable population composed of non-European racial elements” and the latter as a “pure” people of Aryan origin and civilization. While the document warned that Italian racism recognized only racial differences, as against German ideals of racial superiority, it legitimized anti-Semitic prejudice by inviting Italians to “proclaim themselves openly racist.” In subsequent communications, the Duce proclaimed his intention to “adjust” Jewish participation in the state to reflect Jews’ minority status, even as he admonished his audience that “discrimination does not mean persecution.”⁵

A September decree marked the start of this discrimination process. It forbade Jews to teach or attend schools and universities (those currently enrolled in postsecondary schools were allowed to finish their degrees) and expelled them from academies and cultural institutions. The minister of education Giuseppe Bottai, writing in a ministerial bulletin, *Vita universitaria*, publicized the names of Jewish professors who had been terminated and expressed “unconditional admiration” for a measure that would “liberate us from a treacherous people, rejuvenate the University, and purify the race.”⁶ To underscore the primacy of nation over race in Italian doctrine, exceptions were granted for proven patriots and others Jews of “exceptional merit,” and the juridical category of “Aryanized Jew” exempted politically meritorious and appropriately “non-Jewish” Jews.⁷

The literary community was hit particularly hard, due to a concurrent campaign to “take Jewish writers out of circulation” by prohibiting them from publishing their works (the *bonifica del libro*). Although exemptions were eventually made for “classic interpreters of the human spirit,” critics would rarely touch books by Jewish authors. In the face of these restrictions, writers depended on help from their “Aryan” colleagues, who arranged ghostwriting jobs and pseudonymous collaborations in the cinema and the press.

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Giorgio Bassani, whose novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, 1962) describes the awful effects of the Italian racial laws, adopted a semi-underground existence as he embraced antifascist politics and the pen name Giorgio Marchi. Jewish-owned publishing firms had to take on new names and remove Jewish writers from their lists. When the publisher Angelo Formiggini jumped off the Ghirlandina

Tower in Modena, the Fascist National Party secretary Achille Starace remarked that Formigini “died like a Jew—he threw himself off a tower to save the cost of a bullet.”⁸

As in Nazi Germany, state anti-Jewish provisions also created numerous occasions for displays of opportunism and conformism among the intellectual class. While many members of Italy’s cultural community greeted the news of the racial laws with horror, none resigned from the institutes and academies that their Jewish colleagues were forced to abandon, and very few refused collaborations with or awards from papers and agencies engaged in anti-Semitic propaganda. Italians also besieged the Ministry of National Education with requests for the secondary school and university posts that Jews had been forced to vacate. Such jobs became valuable capital in the hands of education minister Bottai, who used them to consolidate his patronage relations.

If anti-Semitism became an ordinary component of many visions of a fascist modernity after 1938, then a great deal of the responsibility lies with the intellectual class. Like other directives of the dictatorship, the racial laws were interpreted, debated, and disseminated to millions of Italians by journalists, writers, archeologists, musicologists, folklorists, historians, and other cultural authorities.

Joined by new “racial experts,” established intellectuals pontificated in print, on the radio, and in public lectures funded by the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND, or National Leisure Time Organization, which aimed to break down class and regional allegiances and protect local traditions of culture and craft), the National Institute of Fascist Culture (INCF), and other institutions. The culture of racism also produced its own university chairs, as well as periodicals such as *Difesa della razza*, *Razza e civiltà*, and *Il diritto razzista*. Anti-Semitism was also front-page news in the *Corriere della sera* and other established dailies.⁹ Even *Difesa della razza*, which embraced biological racism on the German model, was sponsored by Bottai’s Ministry of National Education, and its editors (also the authors of the “Manifesto of Racial Scientists”) all held full-time positions within the Italian university system.¹⁰

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Long excused as the product of German pressure, or marginalized as the work of an extremist fringe, anti-Jewish propaganda was a normal component of Italian fascist culture and a routine category in the résumé of Italian fascist intellectuals in the last five years of the regime.

Nor was Catholic culture extraneous to the diffusion of anti-Jewish doctrines and policies. Damaging at the grass-roots level were the ambivalent positions of the Catholic press and Italian clergy, many of whom had long wished for a greater rate of Jewish assimilation. They condemned German racism for its materialism and determinism but gave the basic goal of Italian racial policies—limiting Jewish influence and encouraging conversion—their public support. The Vatican daily, *L'Osservatorio romano*, reasoned that restrictions on Jewish liberty had been routine for centuries and reassured its readers that Jewish treatment by the fascist state would not be worse than that meted out by popes in the past.¹¹

Still, there were many ways to be a racist in fascist Italy, and not all of them implied the embrace of anti-Semitic sentiments. The word *race* (*razza*) had long been used in Italian as a synonym for people (*popolo*), nation (*nazione*), and stock (*stirpe*). Before and after 1938, folklorists, demographers, and social welfare experts used it in reference to campaigns to increase the population and protect popular traditions. Slippage between the terms *race* and *stock* was particularly common, since most Italian fascists viewed race as a spiritual identity based on common history, language, and traditions rather than on a community of blood. The lability of the word *race* allowed intellectuals who may not have been anti-Semites to take part in the regime's racist subculture and gain credit for toeing the line.¹²

This stated, it is important to consider what needs the racial ideologies did fulfill under fascism. For if Italian racism borrowed much from Nazi Germany, it also reflected national concerns. Indeed, the delineation of a peculiarly “Italian” brand of racial thought, which conceived of race as a mostly cultural and spiritual construct, became a point of pride for fascists who wished to assert their autonomy within the Axis alliance. For many fascist intellectuals, race proved most compelling as a rubric under which ongoing discussions about Italian national identity and modernity found new expression. Racial discourse answered long-term worries about Italian “backwardness” and lack of national integration. It represented the culmination of a strain of fascist thinking that aimed to forge an Italian mass society purged of all degenerate influences.



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The racial laws would end a shameful “inferiority complex” caused by the lack of

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national unity and a racial identity. In a dazzling display of deductive logic, Mussolini told his officials that “we are not Camites, Semites, or Mongols. And if we are none of these races, we are evidently Aryans, and we came from the Alps, from the North. We are

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therefore Aryans of the pure Mediterranean type.

The racial laws represented the culmination of a tradition of blaming internal others for Italy's supposed backwardness and subordinate position in the hierarchy of European nations. These concerns had traditionally received expression in discussions of the Italian South, which had been marked as a realm of primitivity and deviancy since the Risorgimento period.¹³ After 1938, the Jew took on this function, becoming a repository for all the negative qualities and tendencies—individualism, criminality, lack of martial feeling—that had long been used to characterize Southern Italians and that had long formed part of foreigners' stereotypes of Italians as a whole.

Reconfigured as “Aryans,” the racial theorist Giulio Cogni reasoned, the Italians would no longer be seen as “short and dark singing simpletons[,] ... blasphemous bandits with brown faces and assassins' eyes”: Jews now had a monopoly on that image instead. Depictions of Jews as atavistic and criminal forces inside the nation were the stock-in-trade of anti-Semitic propaganda everywhere in Europe. Among Italians who were haunted by the specter of backwardness, the racial laws may have had a vindictory as well as a unifying function.¹⁴

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1. The continued importance of local and regional identities within the Italian state also contributed to a climate of tolerance by hindering the individuation of a shared internal

enemy, as did the virtual absence of Jews in southern Italy and Sicily following the mass expulsions of 1492. Useful overviews of the position of Jews in liberal Italy can be found in Andrew Canepa, “Christian-Jewish Relations in Italy from Unification to Fascism,” in *The Italian Refuge*, ed. Ivo Herzer (Washington, D.C., 1989), 13–33; see also Mario Toscano, “Gli ebrei in Italia dall’emancipazione alle persecuzioni,” *Storia contemporanea* (October 1986): 905–54.

2. Mussolini’s changing attitudes on Jewish issues are analyzed thoroughly by De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin, 1993); Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews* (Oxford, 1978), and Michaelis, “Fascist Policy toward the Italian Jews: Tolerance and Persecution,” in *The Italian Refuge*, ed. Ivo Herzer (Washington, D.C., 1989), 34 –72; and Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei*, which concentrates on the period surrounding the 1938 laws.

3. “Il troppo storpia,” *Il Popolo d’Italia* (December 31, 1936), in *Opera Omnia*, 28:98. The anonymous article, which has been universally attributed to him, formed part of a diatribe against Léon Blum and the Popular Front.

4. Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, touches on differences between Italian fascist and Nazi German racial ideas, as does Aaron Gillette’s “La Difesa della Razza: Racial Theories in Fascist Italy” (manuscript). I thank Aaron Gillette for allowing me to consult portions of his work. In 1941, before the start of German deportations and after almost six thousand Italian Jews (about 12 percent of the Jewish community) had converted to Catholicism and baptized offspring of mixed marriages, Mussolini commented happily that the high rate of intermarriage meant that the “Jewish characteristics” of Italian Jews would be absorbed by the Aryan bloodline within a generation. Mussolini, interview with Yves De Begnac, October 1941, in Yves De Begnac, *Palazzo Venezia* (Rome, 1950), 643. On abjurations and conversions among Jews in 1938–39, see De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, 334.

5. “Scoperta!” *Il Popolo d’Italia* (July 26, 1938); and “Anche nella questione di razza noi tireremo diritto!” *Il Popolo d’Italia* (July 31, 1938), both in *Opera Omnia*, 29:125–26; see also the anonymous note in *Informazione diplomatica* (the bulletin of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (August 5, 1938), which most scholars have attributed to Ciano and Mussolini.

6. “Come coprire i vuoti,” *Vita universitaria* (October 5, 1938). On the impact of the decrees for students and educators, see Roberto Finzi, *L’università italiana e le leggi antiebraiche* (Rome, 1997); and on scientists, see Giorgio Israel and Piero Nastasi, *Scienza e razza nell’Italia fascista* (Bologna, 1998).

7. Exempt categories of persons included families of victims, heroes, and volunteers of World War I and fascist wars; families of fascist martyrs; families of those who joined the PNF before the March on Rome or during the Matteotti crisis; and families of Jews who demonstrated “exceptional merit” in civic matters. By the fall of 1942, of 9,647 requests for “racial certification,” 3,371 Italians had been declared Aryan and 3,839 Jewish, and almost 400 Jews had submitted separate Aryanization requests to the General Directorate of Demography and Race. De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, 346 – 49.

8. Planning memorandum for the *Commission per la bonifica libraria* from Casini to Alfieri, April 8, 1938, cited in Cavaglion and Romagnani, *Le interdizioni del Duce*, 33; Starace, cited in De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, 336. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del Duce*, 117 – 119, reprints the list of 900 “Autori non graditi in Italia,” found in ACS, MCP, b.130, f. “Scrittori ebrei.” This list was given to prefects, who then put pressure on booksellers and publishers to purge their stocks. On the name changes of Jewish publishers, see Casini’s memo to Alfieri, October 17, 1939, in Cavaglion and Romagnani, *Le interdizioni del Duce*, 34 – 35.

9. Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio*, 403–29, reproduces racist statements in the press from intellectuals in various fields. In the *Corriere della sera*, see the editorials “Razzismo fascista” (October 8, 1938), and “Difesa della razza” (November 11, 1938). Anti-Semitic radio programming began in 1938 and intensified with the 1940 Italian-German radio accord. The Ispettorato per la Radio-diffusione had anti-Semitic “conversations” on topics such as “Judaism against Western Culture.” The INFC’s lectures included “Racial Hygiene” and “Colonization and Racial Consciousness.” On the emergence of a culture of race, see De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, 379–401; Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture*; Israel and Nastasi, *Scienza e razza*; Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*; and Gabriele Turi, “Ruolo e destino degli intellettuali nella politica razziale del fascismo,” in *La legislazione antiebraica in Europa* (Rome, 1989), 98 – 121.

10. *Difesa della razza* was directed by Interlandi, whose close links with Mussolini have been documented in Meir Michaelis, “Mussolini’s Unofficial Spokesman.” Its editors were Guido Landra, an assistant in anthropology at the University of Rome and head of the

Racial Studies Office at the Ministry of Popular Culture; Lidio Cipriani, director of the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence, who was heavily involved in ethnographic missions in Ethiopia; Leone Franzi, an assistant in pediatric medicine at the University of Milan; Marcello Ricci, an assistant in zoology at the University of Rome; and Lino Businco, an assistant in general pathology at the University of Rome.

11. P. Francesco Capponi, “Gli Ebrei ed il Concilio,” *L'Osservatore romano* (August 14, 1938). Catholic attitudes about Jewish conversion and assimilation are explored in Lynn M. Gunzberg, *Strangers at Home* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992); and De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo*, 36 – 40. The Vatican's attitudes with regard to pre–World War II fascist racial laws are explored in G. Miccoli, “Santa Sede e Chiesa italiana di fronte alle legge antiebraiche del 1938,” in *La legislazione antiebraica in Italia e in Europa* (Rome, 1989), 163 – 274.

12. Ipsen, *Dictating Demography*, 185, also makes this point. The intertwining of the concepts of race and stock is especially evident in the review *Razza e civiltà*, published by the General Directorate of Demography and Race. On the differences between Italian and German racial theories, see Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*; see also Gentile, “La nazione del fascismo,” 100 – 107. Michele A. Cortelazzo analyzes Mussolini's evolving use of the term *race* in “Il lessico del razzismo fascista,” in *Parlare fascista*, special issue of *Movimento operaio e socialista* (April-June 1984): 57 – 66.

13. Positivists such as Alfredo Niceforo and Lombroso had included criminals, prostitutes, and southerners in their classifications of “atavistic beings” who obstructed Italian modernization, and Lombroso added Jews to the list. See Alfredo Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* (Milan: Remo Sandron, 1898), and his *Italiani del nord e italiani del sud* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1901); and Cesare Lombroso, *L'antisemitismo e le scienze moderne* (Turin, 1894). Lombroso (himself a Jew) argued that the Jews' refusal to give up circumcision and other ancient practices that differentiated them from Christians was a prime cause of anti-Semitism. See Nancy Harrowitz, *Antisemitism, Misogyny, and the Logic of Cultural Difference* (Lincoln, 1994), 41–62. The genealogy of the southerner as an internal Other is traced in Nelson Moe, “‘Altro che Italia!’ Il Sud dei piemontesi (1860 – 61),” *Meridiana*, 15 (1992): 53 – 89; and Mary Gibson, “Biology or Environment? Race and Southern ‘Deviancy’ in the Writings of Italian Criminologists, 1880–1920,” in *The Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country*, ed. Jane Schneider (New York, 1998), 99–115;

see also Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 109–52; and John Dickie, *Darkest Italy* (New York, 1999).

14. Giulio Cogni, “Preliminari sul cinema in difesa della razza,” *Bianco e nero* (January 31, 1938). Cogni was a leading disseminator of the Nordicist school of racial theory that found minor acceptance in Italian circles. For assertions of Jewish criminality, see Tancredi Gatti, “Ferocia astuzia ponderazione degli ebrei,” *Difesa della razza* (January 5, 1939); and Giuseppe Pensabene, “Psicologia dei semiti e dei camiti,” *Difesa della razza* (February 5, 1939). Under fascism, Italians from the Trieste border area were also regarded with suspicion, and became emblems of Slavic primitivity. On this see Glenda Sluga, “Italian National Memory, National Identity, and Fascism,” in *Italian Fascism*, ed. Richard Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (New York, 1999), 178 – 80.

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